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SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION TRIP TO KUTAISI

1. (SBU) Summary. On May 1 and 2 Emboff visited Kutaisi, Georgia's second largest city to gauge the pre-election mood in the lead-up to the May 21 Parliamentary elections. Kutaisi is the capitol of Imereti, and remains a pocket of persistent unemployment, with shuttered automobile factories that closed after independence remaining a potent and very visible symbol of economic stagnation. While the surrounding region supported the President, the city was an opposition stronghold in the January 5 Presidential election. This election campaign seemed to have not yet begun in earnest. At the time, only the United National Movement (UNM) seemed to be actively campaigning in Kutaisi. While most parties had offices in Kutaisi and all are putting up candidates for the majoritarian seat representing Kutaisi, some have nominated residents of Tbilisi for the seat, and a number of the parties were not active - and in fact were not even present in the city. Though the UNM candidate is a well-known, former Governor from the Shevardnadze period, he is somewhat controversial. Though the opposition would be expected to run well in Kutaisi, they seem poised to underperform. End Summary.

The District Election Commission Prepares

2. (SBU) The opposition and some international observers were critical of some elements of the operation of the District Election Commission (DEC) during the January election. To address these criticisms, the Government made changes in the setup of the DEC. Under the new regulations, opposition parties will have representation at both the precinct (PEC) and district level and the process of reporting the results and making appeals has been improved. Avtandil Osepaishvili, the new Head of the Kutaisi DEC is widely respected by all of the parties that met with us and is viewed as "an honest man." He emphasized that the greatest challenge facing the DEC is gaining the trust of the voters in the electoral process. He stated that opening up the process to more party observers has improved the atmosphere, as have improvements in the voters' list. His office still faces serious difficulties in training all of the precinct workers before the election, though they are trying to use many of the same poll workers. He acknowledges that some problems remain in the voters' list, but they have made progress. He stated that even though the public has been able to check and update their registration online and by text message, there has been little activity. Ultimately, because the general public is not good about reporting deaths or changes in residence it falls on the government to try and track down such changes. This is a very difficult task in such a short period of time. He is trying to be open to the press and they have actively publicized the process for making complaints about irregularities and the process for reporting voters' list changes. In general, he observed that the campaign in Kutaisi was "quite passive." Opposition parties complained not about the DEC chair, but about some PEC chairs, and about persistent problems with the voters' list. One local

independent newspaper (Post Scriptum) plans to quiz PEC workers about updates in the voting law, to prove that some inept PEC members remain on the job.

Opposition Claims Much Abuse, Documents Little

13. (SBU) Emboff met with members of the United National Council (UNC) of Opposition and the Traditionalist Party blocs at their respective Kutaisi headquarters. In these meetings the general tone was quite rancorous, with LES staff even expressing real discomfort at the aggressiveness. The New Rights Party, which ran independently in January, is now running in a bloc with the UNC, and its representative alone seemed willing to discuss charges and provide specific examples, as well as even speculating on the political future of Georgia. Among the most serious charges that were made, were claims that opposition supporters had drugs planted on them by the police, and that supporters were intimidated by ten policemen who photographed an opposition rally. The government was accused of running a systematic campaign of terror against the opposition, of intimidating businessmen to keep them from supporting opposition candidates, and even of being fascists who used their party flag like the Nazis did in World War II. In most of these cases, when pressed for examples of terror, or for specifics, the charges largely evaporated. Thus, the charges of drug planting and intimidating businessmen were events that occurred in November of last year. When Emboff asked for details regarding these businessmen, he was told that they said in November that they would support the campaign, but now they would not even return a phone call to the Traditionalist candidate. The UNC accused the government of misuse of

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administrative resources and cited as an example the Governor's statement on television that one factory may be reopened in a few months with new investors and a program for temporary jobs for unemployed residents. The job program, however, is a yearly program that has been carried out for several years and was planned last fall. In a case of claimed voter intimidation an opposition activist was told that she may cause problems for her son (who is a soldier), but the person who warned her, was a neighbor and not a government supporter. They claimed that they are prevented from mounting an active campaign because their PR manager is "afraid" to work full time for their party - but there is no evidence of any intimidation in this case. In the sole verifiable case ten policeman photographed the people who attended a UNC rally on April 30 in downtown Kutaisi. No one spoke to the police, and no one was threatened in any way - but this could be seen as a form of intimidation. When challenged about the use of the term "terror" the UNC representative observed that perhaps the word has a stronger meaning in the west, but they will continue to refer to this as a campaign of terror. Opposition candidates were frustrated that "everyone is forgetting the crisis in November," but did not seem to have any active plans to engage the general public.

The Media: "People Just Want the Campaign to End"

14. (SBU) During visits to Post Scriptum (an independent newspaper) and (independent) Mega Television Emboff discussed the political campaign in Kutaisi and the general state of the media, including local government pressure on the media. They stated that the campaign has really not begun in Kutaisi and that the media has to track down the opposition to find out about their planned activities. Post Scriptum feels that they could become a regional newspaper with investment, and that by receiving grants from the U.S. Embassy and USAID, as well as other western organizations, they have been able to remain independent. In their point of view advertising is not fully developed and companies are both unaware of the benefits of advertising and afraid to support an independent

newspaper that is willing to criticize the Government. Post Scriptum was critical of Mamuka Mghvdeladze, the UNM candidate for the majoritarian seat in Kutaisi. According to them Mghvdeladze was quite corrupt during the Shevardnadze period and has real skeletons in his closet. Kutaisi was the center of Nino Burjanadze's political support, so the media as well as the UNC representative speculated that her recent pull out from the election would have a continuing effect on politics in Kutaisi, and speculated on her political future. According to the media, the UNM is now relatively inactive in Kutaisi, except for the youth branch of the party, because of shake-ups at the national level. The UNC representative even went as far as speculating on a possible Gamkrelidze (New Rights) move to join a future coalition if Burjanadze started a new centrist party. Mega TV was focused on Rioni TV, their only local competitor, who they accuse of having support from Burjanadze's local people, and who they claim receives regular financial support from the local government.

15. (SBU) Comment: While it is hard to forecast if the election campaign will heat up in Kutaisi, it seems at this point as if even in a venue that heavily favors the opposition they seem to have little interest or financial base in running a serious campaign. While there are charges of malfeasance, which at times border on the hysterical, one is more struck by the opposition's passivity and missed opportunities than by the government's activity. End Comment.
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